Pontius Pilate's Letter to Tiberius Caesar

(Pontius Pilate's Letter to Tiberius Caesar verifying his sympathy for Jesus Christ and exposing the treachery of the Jews.)

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To Noble Tiberius Caesar, Emperor of Rome.

Noble Sovereign, Greeting: The events of the last few days in my province have been of such a character that I will give the details in full as they occurred, as I should not be surprised if, in the course of time, they may change the destiny of our nation, for it seems of late that all the gods have ceased to be propitious. I am almost ready to say, Cursed be the day that I succeeded Vallerius Flaceus in the government of Judea; for since then my life has been one of continual uneasiness and distress.

On my arrival at Jerusalem I took possession of the praetorium, and ordered a splendid feast to be prepared, to which I invited the tetrarch of Galilee, with the high priest and his officers. At the appointed hour no guests appeared. This I considered an insult offered to my dignity, and to the whole government which I represent. A few days after, the high priest deigned to pay me a visit. His deportment was grave and deceitful. He pretended that his religion forbade him and his attendants to sit at the table with the Romans, and eat and offer libations with them, but this was only a sanctimonious seeming, for his very countenance betrayed his hypocrisy. Although I thought it expedient to accept his excuse, from that moment I was convinced that the conquered had declared themselves the enemy of the conquerors; and I would warn the Romans to beware of the high priests of this country. They would betray their own mother to gain office and a luxurious living.

It seems to me that, of conquered cities, Jerusalem is the most difficult to

govern. So turbulent are the people that I live in momentary dread of an insurrection. I have not soldiers sufficient to suppress it. I had only one centurion and a hundred men at my command. I requested a reinforcement from the prefect of Syria, who informed me that he had scarcely enough troops sufficient to defend his own province. An insatiate thirst for conquest to extend our empire beyond the means of defending it, I fear, will be the cause of the final overthrow of our whole government. I lived secluded from the masses, for I did not know what those priests might influence the rabble to do; yet I endeavored to ascertain, as far as I could, the mind and standing of the people.

Among the various rumors that came to my ears, there was one in particular that attracted my attention. A young man, it was said, had appeared in Galilee, preaching with a noble unction a new law in the name of the God that had sent him. At first I was apprehensive that his design was to stir up the people against the Romans, but my fears were soon dispelled. Jesus of Nazareth spoke rather as friend of the Romans than of the Jews.

One day in passing by the place of Siloe, where there was a great concourse of people, I observed in the midst of the group a young man who was leaning against a tree, calmly addressing the multitude. I was told it was Jesus. This I could easily have suspected, so great was the difference between him and those listening to him. His golden-colored hair and beard gave to his appearance a celestial aspect. He appeared to be about thirty years of age. Never have I seen a sweeter or more serene countenance. What a contrast between him and his hearers, with their black beards and tawny complexions!

Unwilling to interrupt him by my presence, I continued my walk, but signified to my secretary to join the group and listen. My secretary's name is Manlius. He is the grandson of the chief of the conspirators who encamped in Etruria waiting for Cataline. Manlius had been for a long time an inhabitant of Judea, and is well acquainted with the Hebrew language. He was devoted to me, and worthy of my confidence. On entering the praetorium I found Manlius, who related to me the words Jesus had pronounced at Siloe. Never have I read in the works of the philosophers anything that can compare to the maxims of Jesus. One of the rebellious

Jews, so numerous in Jerusalem, having asked Jesus if it was lawful to give tribute to Caesar, he replied, "Render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar, and unto God the things that are God's."

It was on account of the wisdom of his sayings that I granted so much liberty to the Nazarene; for it was in my power to have had him arrested, and exiled to Pontus; but that would have been contrary to the justice which has always characterized the Roman government in all its dealings with men; this man was neither seditious nor rebellious; I extended to him my protection, unknown perhaps to himself. He was at liberty to act, to speak, to assemble and address the people, and to choose disciples, unrestrained by any praetorian mandate. Should it ever happen (may the gods avert the omen!), should it ever happen, I say, that the religion of our forefathers will be supplanted by the religion of Jesus, it will be to this noble toleration that Rome shall owe her premature death, while I, miserable wretch, will have been the instrument of what the Jews call Providence, and we call destiny.

This unlimited freedom granted to Jesus provoked the Jews--not the poor, but the rich and powerful. It is true, Jesus was severe on the latter, and this was a political reason, in my opinion, for not restraining the liberty of the Nazarene. "Scribes and Pharisees," he would say to them, "you are a race of vipers; you resemble painted sepulchres; you appear well unto men, but you have death within you." At other times he would sneer at the alms of the rich and proud, telling them that the mite of the poor was more precious in the sight of God. Complaints were daily made at the praetorium against the insolence of Jesus.

I was informed that some misfortune would befall him; that it would not be the first time that Jerusalem had stoned those who called themselves prophets; an appeal would be made to Caesar. However, my conduct was approved by the Senate, and I was promised a reinforcement after the termination of the Parthian war.

Being too weak to suppress an insurrection, I resolved upon adopting a measure that promised to restore the tranquility of the city without subjecting the praetorium to humiliating concession. I wrote to Jesus,

requesting an interview with him at the praetorium. He came. You know that in my veins flows the Spanish mixed with Roman blood--as incapable of fear as it is of weak emotion. When the Nazarene made his appearance, I was walking in my basilic, and my feet seemed fastened with an iron hand to the marble pavement, and I trembled in every limb as does a guilty culprit, though the Nazarene was as calm as innocence itself.

When he came up to me, he stopped, and by a signal sign he seemed to say to me, "I am here," though he spoke not a word. For some time I contemplated with admiration and awe this extraordinary type of man--a type of man unknown to our numerous painters, who have given form and figure to all the gods and the heroes. There was nothing about him that was repelling in its character, yet I felt too awed and tremulous to approach him.

"Jesus," said I unto him at last--and my tongue faltered--"Jesus of Nazareth, for the last three years I have granted you ample freedom of speech; nor do I regret it. Your words are those of a sage. I know not whether you have read Socrates or Plato, but this I know, there is in your discourses a majestic simplicity that elevates you far above those philosophers. The Emperor is informed of it, and I, his humble representative in this country, am glad of having allowed you that liberty of which you are so worthy. However, I must not conceal from you that your discourses have raised up against you powerful and inveterate enemies.

"Nor is this surprising. Socrates had his enemies, and he fell a victim to their hatred. Yours are doubly incensed--against you on account of your discourses being so severe upon their conduct; against me on account of the liberty I have afforded you. They even accuse me of being indirectly leagued with you for the purpose of depriving the Hebrews of the little civil power, which Rome has left them. My request--I do not say my order--is, that you be more circumspect and moderate in your discourses in the future, and more considerate of them, lest you arouse the pride of your enemies, and they raise against you the stupid populace, and compel me to employ the instruments of law."

The Nazarene calmly replied, "Prince of the earth, your words proceed not

from true wisdom. Say to the torrent to stop in the midst of the mountain-gorge; it will uproot the trees of the valley. The torrent will answer you that it obeys the laws of nature and the creator. God alone knows whither flow the waters of the torrent. Verily I say unto you, before the rose of Sharon blossoms, the blood of the Just shall be spilt."

"Your blood shall not be spilt," said I with deep emotion; "you are more precious in my estimation on account of your wisdom than all the turbulent and proud Pharisees who abuse the freedom granted them by the Romans. They conspire against Caesar, and convert his bounty into fear, impressing the unlearned that Caesar is a tyrant and seeks their ruin. Insolent wretches! They are not aware that the wolf of the Tiber sometimes clothes himself with the skin of the sheep to accomplish his wicked designs. I will protect you against them. My praetorium shall be an asylum, sacred both day and night."

Jesus carelessly shook his head, and said with a grave and divine smile: "When the day shall have come, there will be no asylums for the son of man, neither in the earth nor under the earth. The asylum of the just is there," pointing to the heavens. "That which is written in the books of the prophets must be accomplished."

"Young man," I answered mildly, "you will oblige me to convert my request into an order. The safety of the province, which has been confided to my care, requires it. You must observe more moderation in your discourses. Do not infringe my order. You know the consequences. May happiness attend you; farewell."

"Prince of the earth," replied Jesus, "I come not to bring war into the world, but peace, love, and charity. I was born the same day on which Augustus gave peace to the Roman world. Persecutions proceed not from me. I expect it from others, and will meet it in obedience to the will of my Father, who has shown me the way. Restrain, therefore, your worldly prudence. It is not in your power to arrest the victim at the foot of the tabernacle of expiation."

So saying, he disappeared like a bright shadow behind the curtain of the

basilic--to my great relief, for I felt a heavy burden on me, of which I could not relieve myself while in his presence.

To Herod, who then reigned in Galilee, the enemies of Jesus addressed themselves, to wreak their vengeance on the Nazarene. Had Herod consulted his own inclinations, he would have ordered Jesus immediately to be put to death; but, though proud of his royal dignity, yet he hesitated to commit an act that might lessen his influence with the Senate, or, like me, was afraid of Jesus. But it would never do for a Roman officer to be scared by a Jew. Previously to this, Herod called on me at the praetorium, and, on rising to take leave, after some trifling conversation, asked me what was my opinion concerning the Nazarene. I replied that Jesus appeared to me to be one of those great philosophers that great nations sometimes produced; that his doctrines were by no means sacrilegious, and that the intentions of Rome were to leave him to that freedom of speech which was justified by his actions. Herod smiled maliciously, and, saluting me with ironical respect, departed.

The great feast of the Jews was approaching, and the intention was to avail themselves of the popular exultation which always manifests itself at the solemnities of a Passover. The city was overflowing with a tumultuous populace, clamoring for the death of the Nazarene. My emissaries informed me that the treasure of the temple had been employed in bribing the people. The danger was pressing. A Roman centurion had been insulted. I wrote to the Prefect of Syria for a hundred foot-soldiers and as many cavalry. He declined. I saw myself alone with a handful of veterans in the midst of a rebellious city, too weak to suppress an uprising, and having no choice left but to tolerate it. They had seized upon Jesus, and the seditious rabble, although they had nothing to fear from the praetorium, believing, as their leaders had told them, that I winked at their sedition--continued vociferating: "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

Three powerful parties had combined together at the time against Jesus: First, the Herodians and the Sadducees, whose seditious conduct seemed to have proceeded from double motives: they hated the Nazarene and were impatient of the Roman yoke. They never forgave me for having entered the holy city with banners that bore the image of the Roman emperor; and

although in this instance I had committed a fatal error, yet the sacrilege did not appear less heinous in their eyes. Another grievance also rankled in their bosoms. I had proposed to employ a part of the treasure of the temple in erecting edifices for public use. My proposal was scorned.

The Pharisees were the avowed enemies of Jesus. They cared not for the government. They bore with bitterness the severe reprimands which the Nazarene for three years had been continually giving them wherever he went. Timid and too weak to act by themselves, they had embraced the quarrels of the Herodians and the Sadducees. Besides these three parties, I had to contend against the reckless and profligate populace, always ready to join a sedition, and to profit by the disorder and confusion that resulted therefrom.

Jesus was dragged before the High Priest and condemned to death. It was then that the High Priest, Caiaphas, performed a divisory act of submission. He sent his prisoner to me to confirm his condemnation and secure his execution. I answered him that, as Jesus was a Galilean, the affair came under Herod's jurisdiction, and ordered him to be sent thither. The wily tetrarch professed humility, and, protesting his deference to the lieutenant of Caesar, he committed the fate of the man to my hands. Soon my palace assumed the aspect of a besieged citadel. Every moment increased the number of the malcontents. Jerusalem was inundated with crowds from the mountains of Nazareth. All Judea appeared to be pouring into the city.

I had taken a wife from among the Gauls, who pretended to see into futurity. Weeping and throwing herself at my feet, she said to me: "Beware, beware, and touch not that man; for he is holy. Last night I saw him in a vision. He was walking on the waters; he was flying on the wings of the wind. He spoke to the tempest and to the fishes of the lake; all were obedient to him. Behold, the torrent in Mount Kedron flows with blood, the statues of Caesar are filled with gemonide; the columns of the interium have given way; and the sun is veiled in mourning like a vestal in the tomb. Ah! Pilate, evil awaits thee. If thou wilt not listen to the vows of thy wife, dread the curse of a Roman Senate; dread the frowns of Caesar."

By this time the marble stair groaned under the weight of the multitude.

The Nazarene was brought back to me. I proceeded to the halls of justice, followed by my guard, and asked the people in a severe tone what they demanded.

"The death of the Nazarene," was the reply.

"For what crime?"

"He has blasphemed; he has prophesied the ruin of the temple; he calls himself the Son of God, the Messiah, the King of the Jews."

"Roman justice," said I, "punishes not such offences with death."

"Crucify him! Crucify him!" cried the relentless rabble. The vociferations of the infuriated mob shook the palace to its foundations.

There was but one who appeared to be calm in the midst of the vast multitude; it was the Nazarene. After many fruitless attempts to protect him from the fury of his merciless persecutors, I adopted a measure which at the moment appeared to me to be the only one that could save his life. I proposed, as it was their custom to deliver a prisoner on such occasions, to release Jesus and let him go free, that he might be the scapegoat, as they called it; but they said Jesus must be crucified.

I then spoke to them of the inconsistency of their course as being incompatible with their laws, showing that no criminal judge could pass sentence on a criminal unless he had fasted one whole day; and that the sentence must have the consent of the Sanhedrin, and the signature of the president of that court; that no criminal could be executed on the same day his sentence was fixed, and the next day, on the day of his execution, the Sanhedrin was required to review the whole proceeding; also, according to their law, a man was stationed a short way off on horseback to cry the name of the criminal and his crime, and the names of his witnesses, and to know if any one could testify in his favor; and the prisoner on his way to execution had the right to turn back three times and to plead any new thing in his favor. I urged all these pleas, hoping they might awe them into subjection; but they still cried, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

I then ordered Jesus to be scourged, hoping this might satisfy them; but it only increased their fury. I then called for a basin, and washed my hands in the presence of the clamorous multitude, thus testifying that in my judgment Jesus of Nazareth had done nothing deserving of death; but in vain. It was his life these wretches thirsted for.

Often in our civil commotions have I witnessed the furious anger of the multitude, but nothing could be compared to what I witnessed on this occasion. It might have been truly said that all the phantoms of the infernal regions had assembled at Jerusalem. The crowd appeared not to walk, but to be borne off and whirled as a vortex, rolling along in living waves from the portals of the praetorium even unto Mount Zion, with howling screams, shrieks, and vociferations such as were never heard in the seditions of the Pannonia, or in the tumults of the forum.

By degrees the day darkened like a winter's twilight, such as had been at the death of the great Julius Caesar. It was likewise the Ides of March. I, the continued governor of a rebellious province, was leaning against a column of my basilic, contemplating athwart the dreary gloom these fiends of Tartarus dragging to execution the innocent Nazarene. All around me was deserted. Jerusalem had vomited forth her indwellers through the funeral gate that leads to Gemonica.

An air of desolation and sadness enveloped me. My guards had joined the cavalry, and the centurion, with a display of power, was endeavoring to keep order. I was left alone, and my breaking heart admonished me that what was passing at that moment appertained rather to the history of the gods than that of men. A loud clamor was heard proceeding from Golgotha, which, borne on the winds, seemed to announce an agony such as was never heard by mortal ears. Dark clouds lowered over the pinnacle of the temple, and setting over the city covered it as with a veil. So dreadful were the signs that men saw both in the heavens and on the earth that Dionysius the Aeropagite is reported to have exclaimed, 'Either the author of nature is suffering or the universe is falling apart.'

Whilst these appalling scenes of nature were transpiring, there was a

dreadful earthquake in lower Egypt, which filled everybody with fear, and scared the superstitious Jews almost to death. It is said Balthasar, an aged and learned Jew of Antioch, was found dead after the excitement was over. Whether he died from alarm or grief is not known. He was a strong friend of the Nazarene.

Near the first hour of the night, I threw my mantle around me and went down into the city toward the gates of Golgotha. The sacrifice was consummated. The crowd was returning home, still agitated, it is true, but gloomy, taciturn, and desperate. What they had witnessed had stricken them with terror and remorse. I also saw my little Roman cohort pass by mournfully, the standard-bearer having veiled his eagle in token of grief; and I overheard some of the Jewish soldiers murmuring strange words, which I did not understand. Others were recounting miracles very like those which have so often smitten the Romans by the will of the gods. Sometimes, groups of men and women would halt, then, looking back toward Mount Calvary, would remain motionless in expectation of witnessing some new prodigy.

I returned to the praetorium, sad and pensive. On ascending the stairs, the steps of which were still stained with the blood of the Nazarene, I perceived an old man in a suppliant posture, and behind him several Romans in tears. He threw himself at my feet and wept most bitterly. It is painful to see an old man weep, and my heart being already overcharged with grief, we, though strangers, wept together. And in truth it seemed that the tears lay very shallow that day with many whom I perceived in the vast concourse of people. I never witnessed such an extreme revulsion of feeling. Those who betrayed and sold him, those who testified against him, those who cried, "Crucify him, we have his blood," all slunk off like cowardly curs, and washed their teeth with vinegar. As I am told that Jesus taught a resurrection after death, if such should be the fact, I am sure it commenced in this vast crowd.

"Father," said I to him, after gaining control of my feelings, "who are you, and what is your request?"

"I am Joseph of Arimathea," replied he, "and am come to beg of you upon

my knees the permission to bury Jesus of Nazareth."

"Your prayer is granted," said I to him; and at the same time I ordered Manlius to take some soldiers with him to superintend the interment, lest it should be profaned.

A few days after, the sepulchre was found empty. His disciples proclaimed all over the country that Jesus had risen from the dead, as he had foretold. This created more excitement even than the crucifixion. As to its truth, I cannot say for certain, but I have made some investigation of the matter; so you can examine for yourself, and see if I am in fault, as Herod represents.

Joseph buried Jesus in his own tomb. Whether he contemplated his resurrection or calculated to cut him another, I cannot tell. The day after he was buried [i.e., Saturday] one of the priests came to the praetorium and said they were apprehensive that his disciples intended to steal the body of Jesus and hide it, and then make it appear that he had risen from the dead, as he had foretold, and of which they were perfectly convinced. I sent him to the captain of the royal guard (Malcus) to tell him to take the Jewish soldiers, place as many around the sepulchre as were needed; then if anything should happen, they could blame themselves, and not the Romans.

When the great excitement arose about the sepulchre being found empty, I felt a deeper solicitude than ever. I sent for Malcus, who told he had placed his lieutenant, Ben Isham, with one hundred soldiers, around the sepulchre. He told me that Isham and the soldiers were very much alarmed at what had occurred there that morning. I sent for this man, Isham, who related to me, as near as I can recollect the following circumstances: He said that at about the beginning of the fourth watch they saw a soft and beautiful light over the sepulchre. He at first thought that the women had come to embalm the body of Jesus, as was their custom, but he could not see how they had gotten through the guards. While these thoughts were passing through his mind, behold, the whole place was lighted up, and there seemed to be crowds of the dead in their grave-clothes. All seemed to be shouting and filled with ecstasy, while all around and above was the most

beautiful music he had ever heard; and the whole air seemed to be full of voices praising God. At this time there seemed to be a reeling and swimming of the earth, so that he turned so sick and faint that he could not stand on his feet. He said the earth seemed to swim from under him, and his senses left him, so that he knew not what did occur. I asked him in what condition he was when he came to himself. He said he was lying on the ground with his face down. I asked him if he could not have been mistaken as to the light. Was it not day that was coming in the East? He said at first he thought of that, but at a stone's cast it was exceedingly dark; and then he remembered it was too early for day

I asked him if his dizziness might not have come from being wakened up and getting up too suddenly, as it sometimes had that effect. He said he was not, and had not been asleep all night, as the penalty was death for him to sleep on duty. He said he had let some of the soldiers sleep at a time. Some were asleep then. I asked him how long the scene lasted. He said he did not know, but he thought nearly an hour. He said it was hid by the light of day. I asked him if he went to the sepulchre after he had come to himself. He said no, because he was afraid; that just as soon as relief came, they all went to their quarters.

I asked him if he had been questioned by the priests. He said they had. They wanted him to say it was an earthquake, and that they were asleep, and offered him money to say that the disciples came and stole Jesus; but he saw no disciples; he did not know that the body was gone until he was told. I asked him what was the private opinion of those priests he had conversed with. He said that some of them thought that Jesus was no man; that he was not a human being; that he was not the son of Mary; that he was not the same that was said to be born of the virgin in Bethlehem; that the same persons had been on the earth before with Abraham and Lot, and at many times and places.

It seems to me that, if the Jewish theory be true, these conclusions are correct, for they are in accord with this man's life, as is known and testified by both friends and foes, for the elements were no more in his hands than the clay in the hands of the potter. He could convert water into wine; he could change death into life, disease into health; he could calm the seas,

still the storms, call up fish with a silver coin in its mouth. Now, I say, if he could do all these things, which he did, and many more, as the Jews all testify, and it was doing these things that created this enmity against him--he was not charged with criminal offenses, nor was he charged with violating any law, nor of wronging any individual in person, and all these facts are known to thousands, as well by his foes as by his enemies--I am almost ready to say, as did Manlius at the cross, "Truly, this was the Son of God."

Now, noble Sovereign, this is as near the facts in the case as I can arrive at, and I have taken pains to make the statement very full, so that you may judge of my conduct upon the whole, as I hear that Antipater has said many hard things of me in this matter. With the promise of faithfulness and good wishes to my noble Sovereign,

I am your most obedient servant,
Pontius Pilate